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ABSTRACT

By using carefully developed questions during the early stages of counseling, counselors can "open the door" for clients to feel comfortable discussing spiritual or religious themes in counseling. This process of incorporating spirituality into counseling may involve a paradigm shift and additional training for counselors; thus, guidelines are presented here to facilitate the assessment of a client's spiritual orientation and functioning. The suggested format is offered since counselors may not know how to broach the subject or may hesitate to question clients about spirituality because they feel these issues are too personal or simply not important. Following a discussion of the definition of spirituality, 17 questions are presented as a format for use in the "spirituality interview." Intentions of the format are: (1) to provide the counselor with insight into the spiritual and religious history of the individual; (2) to provide information regarding his/her curent thinking in the spiritual realm; and (3) to assist counselors in assessing how a client's conceptualizations of the spiritual realm might relate to other areas of his/her life. (Contains 23 references.) (TS)

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The Assessment of Spiritual Issues in Counseling

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The Assessment of Spiritual Issues in Counseling

in the recent past there has been an upsurge in the number of Americans who consider themselves to be religious or religiously inclined (Morrissey, 1994). For a variety of reasons, millions of Americans are setting out on a "search for the sacred" (Newsweek, p. 53). Three organizations conducted polls with American subjects in the latter half of 1994 and 1995. In all three polls, the results indicated an increase in Americans' interest in spiritual matters. In a 1994 Newsweek poll (Newsweek, 11/28/94), 58% of those surveyed reported a need to grow spiritually, and at least one-third of respondents reported having experienced some sort of mystical or religious experience (p.54). A second poll conducted by Gallop (cited in USA Weekend, 1994) indicated that 90% of Americans pray, and 75% pray every day. In an American Bible Society project (High Point Enterprise, 10/10/95), the top priority of the 1212 adults surveyed was to strive for a right relationship with God. Their second priority was to lead a moral life, and third was to maintain spiritual well-being.

Responding to this renewed interest in spirituality, Kandor (cited in Morrissey, 1994) stated that "we (counselors) need to be aware of that (spirituality) as much as we are aware of race, disability, and gender" (p. 2). However, counselors often are guilty of not dealing with the spiritual/religious aspects of life. In fact, many counselors say that clients' spiritual and religious beliefs are being overlooked (Morrissey, 1994). Several national studies have confirmed this assertion, indicating that psychotherapists in general show a low level of religious affiliation and participation (Bergin, 1990; Ragan, Malony, & Geit-Hallahmi, 1980; Shafranske & Malony, 1990; Gibson & Herron, 1990). This is noteworthy in

the light of Worthington's (1988) claim that the religious values in both the therapist and the client will affect the therapeutic process in implicit and in explicit ways.

Learning to incorporate spirituality into counseling may involve a paradigm shift and additional training for counselors. Morrissey (1994) suggested seven guidelines: First, counselors should help clients feel that their spirituality is accepted in the counseling process; Second, clients' spiritual and religious involvement can be viewed as a part of the solution and not part of the problem; Third, counselors should become more acquainted with cultures, religious values, beliefs and practices, and should strive to integrate these with counseling theory and practice; Fourth, counselors should incorporate into their counseling practice community resources that represent varying cultures and religious values; Fifth, counselors should explore and evaluate their own spirituality; Sixth, counselors should be aware of the messages communicated creatively maneuvering around religious and spiritual issues; Seventh, counselors should develop an honest way to communicate with clients about spiritual issues. In summary, spiritual and religious issues merit as much respect as other issues.

It is the purpose of this article to delineate a means of assessing clients' spirituality and religiosity. By using carefully developed questions during the early stages of counseling, counselors can "open the door" for clients to feel comfortable discussing spiritual or religious themes in counseling. There is a need, however, for clearer guidelines for practitioners to use in evaluating clients' spirituality. As in any treatment situation, before there can be proper treatment there must be proper diagnosis. Therefore this article attempts to

provide guidelines for assessing a client's spiritual orientation and functioning. These guidelines were developed by first reviewing various definitions of spirituality as well as by examining several of the more widely cited models of spirituality and spiritual development (Folwer, 1981; Hall, 1986; Jung, 1964; Whitehead & Whitehead, 1979; Whitmer & Sweeny, 1992).

Defining Spirituality

Definitions of spirituality from the helping fields are numerous. Various definitions have developed as the counseling literature has focused on spirituality as a component of overall wellness. For example, Myers, Witmer, & Sweeny (1994) defined spirituality as "a quality of human life that goes beyond the physical and material aspects of existence, recognizing a force or spirit that is the essence of the person." (p. 6)

Chandler, Holden and Kolander (1992) offered the following definition of spirituality,: "the innate capacity to, and tendency to seek to transcend one's current locus of centricity, which transcendence involves increased knowledge and love" (p. 169). Chandler et al. go on to say that spirituality is a capacity found only in humans which internally motivates us to seek the experiences of transcendence. From this psychological position humans evaluate life events so that they may move to a higher or broader world view accepting what is and at the same time working to bring about change for the greater good.

An important implication of defining spirituality as a component of wellness, is that spirituality is viewed as present in all people and existing on a continuum with many levels of awareness and focus. The idea of spirituality as a universal construct with numerous levels of expression is one that has received much attention and is now generally accepted. In

addition, these definitions imply that spiritual development is a life-long process whereby people may incorporate spiritual experiences over time, resulting ultimately in spiritual transformation.

What then does it mean to be spiritually healthy or well? According to Opatz (1986) spiritual wellness is "...the willingness to seek meaning and purpose in human existence, to question everything, and to appreciate the intangibles which cannot be explained or understood readily. A spiritually well person seeks harmony between that which lies within the individual and the force that come from outside the individual." (p. 61)

Finally, central to the understanding of any definition of spirituality is the issue of meaning or how individuals make meaning of their existence. Fowler (1981; 1991) has examined extensively the process by which people construct meaning of their lives and has labeled this process, "faith." He defines faith as consisting of three core domains to which all individuals make commitments. So that faith is a dynamic pattern of trust in a "center of values," "realities of power," and "master stories" (Fowler, 1991).

The Spirituality Interview

Counselors assess many areas of their clients' lives in intimate detail to gain a more complete understanding of the factors that influence their functioning. However, counselors may avoid discussing spiritual issues which are, theoretically, a universal occurrence and subsequently the core of a clients understanding of themselves and their lives. Counselor may hesitate to question clients about spiritual issues because they feel these issues are to personal, not important, or simply may not know how to broach the subject. Therefore the Spirituality Interview Format (SIF) is offered to assist counselors in obtaining this necessary information.

The questions on the SIF were developed as a guideline for clinicians to use in exploring the spiritual orientation of a client. The format is intended to: (1) provide the counselor with insight in to the spiritual and religious history of the individual, (2) provide information regarding his/her current thinking in the spiritual realm (3) to assist counselors in assessing how a client's conceptualizations of the spiritual realm might relate to other areas of his/her life. The interview can be performed in a formal way or may be integrated into the context of a counselor's informal assessment procedures.

The idea behind the interview is for the counselor to obtain an understanding of the cosmology of a particular client much as an anthropologist would when interviewing an individual from a culture of which he/she was not a member. Once an understanding of the client's cosmology is developed then the counselor may assess how the client's perceptions of spiritual issues might relate to his/her presenting concern(s). In addition, by asking the questions on the interview format, the counselor has unapologeticaly moved spirituality into the sphere of normal and appropriate content for counseling.

Spirituality Interview Format

When interviewing a client regarding spiritual/religious issues, it is important to pay particular attention to the language the client uses as well as the language he/she does not use (e.g., God, Higher Power, etc.) Listen for the affective tone associated with the descriptions he/she gives (e.g., anger, fear, peacefulness, etc.). Allow the client to talk with-out interruption as much as possible when he/she is responding to a question.

1) What, if any, was your families religious affiliation during your childhood?

2) How important were religious practices to your family?

3) Do you have fond, negative, or indifferent memories regarding religious practices with which you were involved as a child?

4) Would you say that you take more of a Scientific/Intellectual or Spiritual/Mystical approach to life?

5) Do you believe that science and religion are opposing or complimentary forces?

6) What is your current religious affiliation, if any, and how important is it to your life?

7) How do your religious/spiritual beliefs affect decision making in your life?

8) How would you describe your conceptualization/understanding of life in regards to the purpose of your existence?

9) What words would you use to describe God, your Higher Power, the Force which drives the universe, etc.? (Match the client's language).

10) What feelings or thoughts come to your mind when you think about God, Higher Power, etc.?

11) How do you view God's, your Higher Power's, the Creator's, etc. involvement in your life at this time?

12) Do you believe God is concerned about what is happening with you at this time? (The event(s) which brought him/her to counseling).

13) At what time in your life would you say that you have felt the most in touch with God/ at peace with the universe, etc. (Match the client's language). Why? What was it about that time...?

14) Do you believe that there are many possible out-comes to the plan for your life or that there is really one best plan?

15) Are you actively involved in the pursuit of your spiritual growth? How?

16) Do you pray, meditate, or read spiritual writings regularly? If yes, what do you do and how often?

17) Would you be willing to participate in homework assignments that are intended to address issues related to your spiritual development?

Obviously, there are a number of possible outcomes which may result from the counselors inclusion of all or some of the above questions in their assessment of a client. Nevertheless, this process will provide for the counselor a sense of the strength, centrality, and complexity of a client's current spiritual orientation. Further, and perhaps more importantly, the counselor will have established the precedent that issues involving the client's spirituality and construction of meaning are (and should be) content for the counseling process.

A note of caution and common sense might be appropriate with regard to the use of the SIF. Undoubtedly some clients will be suspicious and/or confused as to the importance and relevance of such questions. It is our belief that it is the counselor's responsibility to be ready to explain how spirituality relates to clinical concerns which may, on the surface, show no direct relationship to the spiritual. In addition, as with other intimate areas of life which counselors discuss with their clients, counselors should examine their own spiritual orientation in detail so they may approach these issues clearly, directly, and without trepidation.

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